

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Louise Payson
1894-1977

The golden age of American gardens, spanning the five decades from 1890 to 1940, could also be called the golden age of women landscape designers. Although gardening and its strong association with the domestic realm had long been considered a suitable activity for women, it was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that they first took up gardening and landscape design as professionals. These five decades provided women with unique educational and professional opportunities that ceased to exist after 1945. These women practitioners left a legacy of design excellence that only recently has begun to be rediscovered and appreciated. Portland-born landscape architect Louise Payson was

educated and practiced during this period, establishing herself as a leader in the field.

Louise Payson was born on November 12, 1894, the third child of Edgar Robinson and Harriet Estabrook Payson. The Payson family had long played a prominent role in Portland's business, social, religious, and philanthropic circles. In the early years of his business career, Louise's father owned the Portland Water Company. When it was acquired by the Portland Water District, he joined his brothers Charles and Herbert in the family's investment banking firm. Louise's mother was born in Bridgton and came to Portland to teach at a school for the deaf. Sadly, Mrs. Payson died of typhoid fever in 1898 when Louise was four years old.

After Mrs. Payson's death, Edgar's sister Jeannette came to live with the family and helped to care for the children. Although Mr. Payson was remarried in 1901 to Edith Alden Packard of New York City, "Aunt Jeannette", as Louise referred to her, continued to play a major role in Louise's life, as would Aunt Jeannette's close friend and companion, Annie Oakes Huntington.

Aunt Jeannette never married and divided her time between Payson family homes in Portland and Falmouth Foreside and her own Waterford residence, Lane's End.¹ She travelled extensively and was particularly fond of long motor trips through New England and along the eastern seaboard. She also travelled abroad. Her companion, Annie Oakes Huntington, was a frequent visitor to Portland and Waterford.²

Annie Oakes Huntington was a well-known expert on botany, specializing in trees. She had studied with Charles Sprague Sargent at the Arnold Arboretum and later tutored students there. In 1902 her *Studies of Trees in Winter* was published with an introduction by Sargent. The book was an immediate success, going through three printings in 1902, 1905, and 1910, and was used for instruction at the Yale School of Forestry. Encouraged by the success of her first book, she produced a smaller volume in 1908 entitled, *Poison Ivy and Swamp Sumach*. In addition to her teaching at the Arnold Arboretum, Miss Huntington

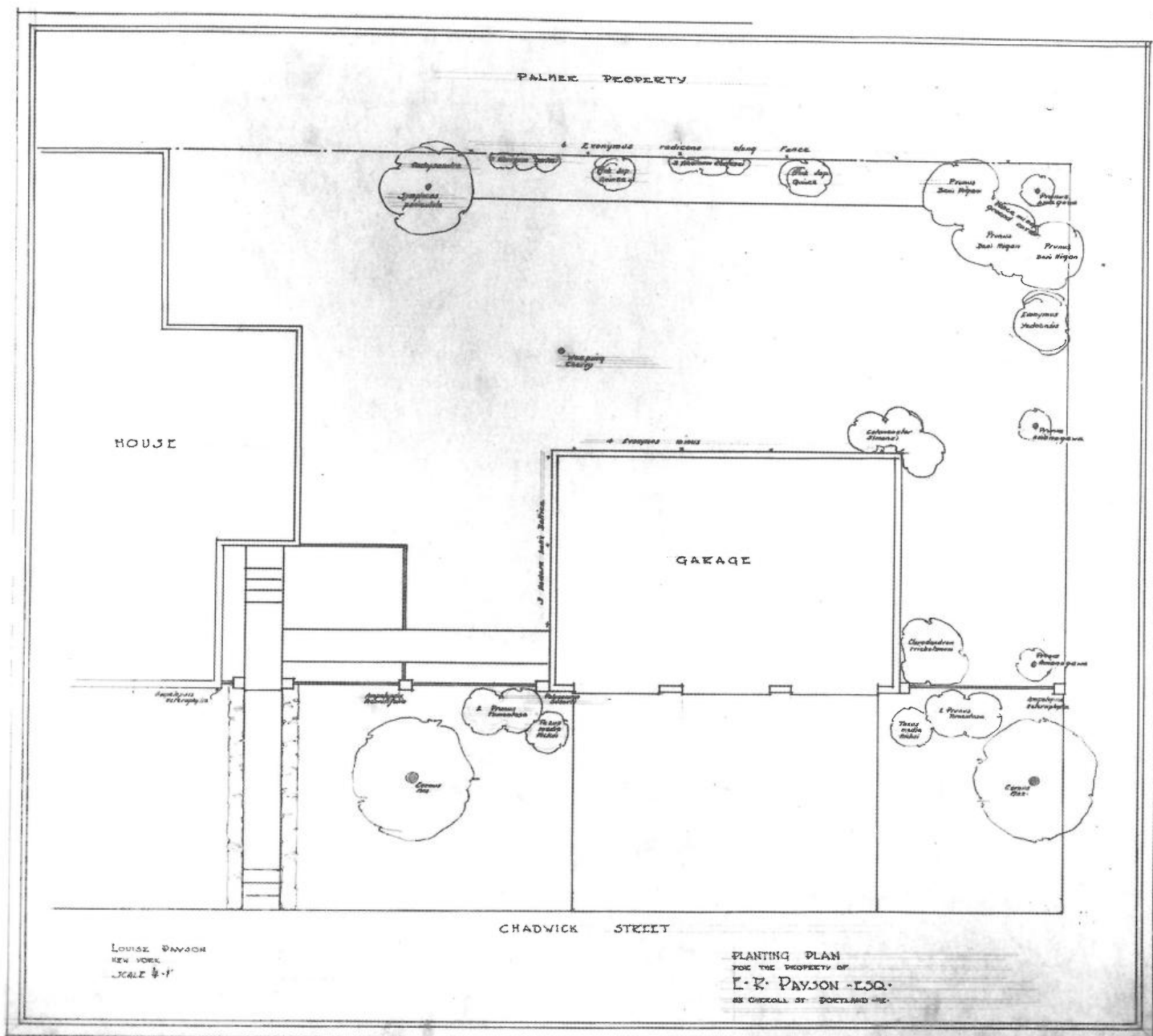


Figure 1. Planting plan for Edgar R. Payson, Portland, 1920 (Private Collection).

lectured frequently throughout the northeast, wrote a regular column on trees in the *Boston Transcript*, and contributed to *Country Life in America* and *New England Magazine*. She also designed private gardens in the Boston area, and in 1909 Edgar Payson asked her to prepare a design for the Water Company reservoir in Portland.

As a child, Louise Payson frequently traveled with her family as well as with Aunt Jeanette and Miss Huntington.³ She also witnessed a great deal of house building and laying out of gardens for various family members. Edgar Payson had a summer house built in Falmouth Foreside in 1907. The following year Aunt Jeanette was designing her house in Waterford, and work on the grounds soon followed.⁴

Louise Payson attended Waynflete School in Portland and graduated from Walnut Hill, a girls' preparatory school in Natick, Massachusetts. Not particularly happy with the academic rigors of Walnut Hill, Louise began her studies at the Lowthrope School of Landscape Architecture, Gardening and Horticulture for Women in Groton, Massachusetts. Modeled after the Swanley College of Horticulture in Kent that Mrs. Low, Lowthrope's founder, had attended in England, it was the pioneer school of its kind in the United States.⁵ Except for a few land grant colleges in the midwest, Lowthrope was the only landscape architecture program available for women in the United States.

In 1901, the year Lowthrope was established, Miss Huntington was invited by Mrs. Low to teach a class on

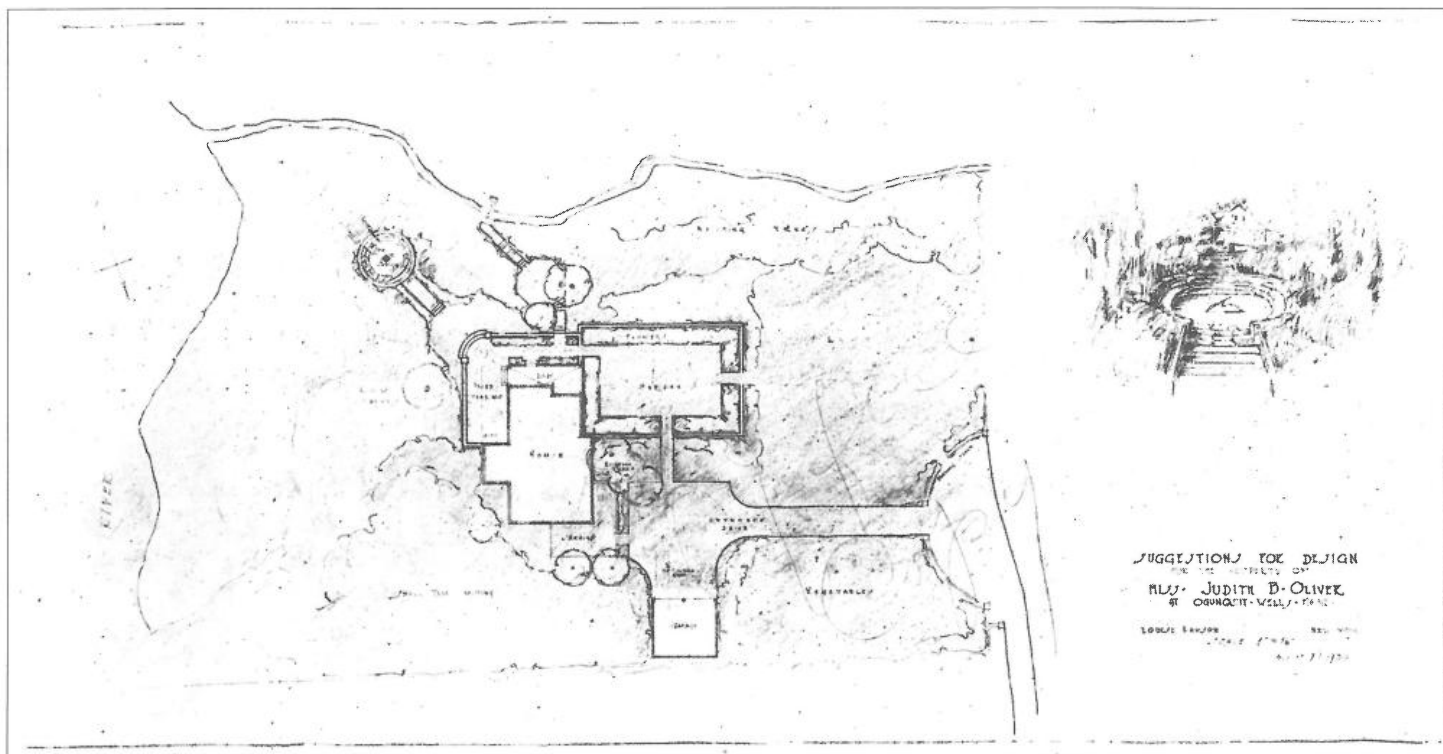


Figure 3. Suggestions for Design of the Property of Miss Judith B. Oliver, Ogunquit, 1930 (Private Collection).

Mrs. Shipman, whose knowledge of design and horticulture was largely self-taught, was equally grateful for the assistance of these professionally-trained women. She acknowledged her debt to these young women in the *Garden Notebook*, an autobiographical record of her career:

And this brings me to where I must express my gratitude to the group of young women, nearly all Lowthorpe graduates, who made my work possible. Elizabeth Leonard, now Mrs. Robert Strang, who was not only my first assistant, but who taught me every day she was with me, - a graduate of Cornell, later instructor at Lowthorpe. She was loved and admired by all who knew her. Louise Jocelyn, now Mrs. Julian Clark. Our profession lost a great talent when she married, and I the daily companionship of a beloved friend. Then Louise Payson came fresh from Lowthorpe, so young and full of ability, and after twelve years with me, started out brilliantly for herself. Also Florence Stroh, the most competent head of an office one could imagine, and finally, Frances McCormic, without whom work during old age would have been impossible. There have been many more - these are only the few who remained with me for years and been from time to time head of my office. Without them my work could never have been accomplished, and so when I say "we", you will know I am speaking of these great assistants to whom my gratitude is unending.⁹

While in New York Louise Payson continued her education at Columbia's School of Architecture, which she attended from 1922 to 1923.¹⁰ She also travelled with her family, spending part of the winter in Villefrance-Sur-Mer near Nice in Provence and

returning to Cornish for the summer. In 1924 she spent the entire year abroad, the spring and summer in England and Scotland, the fall in Italy, and the winter in Villefrance. On these trips she collected photographs of historic buildings and gardens and appears to have developed an affinity for French architecture.¹¹

During the time she worked for Mrs. Shipman, Louise prepared landscape plans for family members in Portland's Western Promenade neighborhood and Falmouth Foreside. These designs, done in the formative years of her career, are interesting in that they show the influence of Mrs. Shipman while simultaneously hint at the approach Louise would take in her later, mature work.

The earliest known surviving Payson drawing is a design for her father at 83 Carroll Street in Portland (Figure 1). The Paysons moved from a larger home in the same neighborhood to Carroll Street in 1917. Their new house was a semi-detached residence designed by local architect George Burnham in 1911. Payson lived in the eastern half on the corner of Carroll and Chadwick Streets. The house had a small rear yard (approximately 80 by 50 feet) and two side yard sections flanking a driveway (approximately 20 by 20 feet). The yard was fenced, with a driveway, a garage, and a side entry on Chadwick Street.

Like many city gardens, the focus at 83 Carroll Street was inward, creating an enclosed, private space using vines to screen the garage and various



Figure 4. Miss Judith B. Oliver (seated) in her enclosed garden, with Joan Pickering, Ogunquit, circa 1955 (Private Collection).

standing, but also acknowledged the Paysons' easy-going, unpretentious lifestyle. This is perhaps best characterized by the range of their interests, which included the New York Mets, hunting and fishing, and their extensive art collection now displayed in part at the Portland Museum of Art.

In contrast to the Charles Payson design in scale but equal in complexity was a project in Ogunquit for Miss Judith Oliver, on which Louise began work in 1930 (Figures 3, 4). Miss Oliver was a Red Cross worker in Europe during World War I and returned to this country exhausted and in need of rest and recuperation. The cottage in Ogunquit was a gift to her from a family friend, Mr. Hoyt, a St. Louis industrialist and Ogunquit summer resident. Ogunquit must have agreed with her; she spent her summers there and later, when she retired from her accounting position at her brother's Cadillac dealership, became a year-round resident.¹⁴ Seven detailed drawings survive for this project. They include a concept drawing, "Suggestions

for the Design for the Property of Miss Judith B. Oliver," planting plans, construction details of the terrace and circular overlook, and full size detail drawings for the fence.

Reflecting the original seasonal use of the house, the plan for Miss Oliver is an extension of it with the creation of three outdoor rooms, an enclosed garden, a woodland garden, and a circular overlook. The site, just over an acre, fronts on the Ogunquit River with a view of the dunes and the ocean beyond. The plan very cleverly brought people through the enclosed garden, along the granite side porch, to the front of the house where the magnificent view is seen for the first time.

The overall plan observed an Ellen Shipman design principal, which was "Don't plant anything outside the wall that isn't native, but you can plant anything you want inside."¹⁵ Within the garden enclosed by a white fence reminiscent of colonial designs, Miss Payson specified over seventy-five different varieties of plants, primarily old-fashioned

flowering trees and shrubs around the perimeter. It is also a design where the structure of the garden is defined by plant material rather than architectural elements.

At first glance, the design for 83 Carroll Street looks simple. It is, however, a subtle plan striving for harmony of form, line, color, and texture. There is a tremendous variety of foliage, generally small-scale and delicate, in keeping with the size of the yard. Color is subtle throughout the spring, summer, and fall, with some winter interest provided by evergreen vines and ground covers as well as the sculptural form of the leafless trees and shrubs. The Paysons had a summer house in Falmouth Foreside, which may explain the lack of emphasis on summer color. Although this design was done early in her career, Louise's knowledge of plant material and sensitivity to the site is clearly apparent.

The same year that Louise worked on her father's property, she designed a perennial garden for her Uncle Charles in Falmouth Foreside (Figure 2). In contrast to the 83 Carroll Street site, Heron House is located on a prominent point of land with expansive views of Casco Bay. Charles Payson purchased the house in 1917 and three years later hired Portland architects John Calvin and John Howard Stevens to remodel it. The property remained in the family until the death of Charles' daughter Margaret in 1986. Louise continued to work on the grounds until the late 1930s.

Louise's initial project at Heron House was a 33 by 70 foot perennial garden. Although designed early in her career, the plant material she chose for Heron House is remarkably similar to what she would use throughout her life. Like Mrs. Shipman, many of Louise's drawings include cultural and maintenance information.¹² These practical notes demonstrate the attention to detail and the professionalism these women brought to their work. They also hint at the designer's painterly approach to the composition:

Cut back *agave* after flowering to allow Japanese *Anemones* to develop. Cut back oriental poppies as soon as leaves begin to turn yellow and stake *Gypsophila paniculata* to lean forward and cover space occupied by poppies.

Lilium Auratum and *Lilium speciosum* to be planted among Peonies for late summer bloom.

Very important for the success of the garden is the careful staking. The plants must not be tied to the stakes, but the stakes placed around the plant or group of plants of the same variety, and raffia tied to the stakes leaving the plants free in the center. The Hardy Asters may be staked so as to be pulled forward and cover any bare spaces where plants have been cut back.

Louise Payson left Mrs. Shipman's office in 1927 and started her own practice a few blocks away on East Forty-Eighth Street. Her early years on her own

were busy ones. She designed the grounds of three large estates: Maynard Bird, Fairfield, Connecticut; John Kane, Locust Valley, New York; and her cousin Charles Shipman Payson and his wife Joan Whitney Payson in Manhasset, New York. The Payson estate is included here because the client had strong Maine connections. It also offers a glimpse of Miss Payson's talents applied to a large-scale project.

Louise's cousin, Charles Shipman Payson, was born in Portland in 1898, the son of Edgar Payson's younger brother Herbert and Sally Brown Payson, the granddaughter of John Bundy Brown, the city's leading mid-nineteenth century businessman. In 1924 Charles Payson married Joan Whitney, the daughter of Payne and Helen Hay Whitney. At the time of her marriage her father was the third richest man in America, trailing only Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles S. Payson owned six homes, including one in Falmouth Foreside, but their primary residence was a 100 acre estate in Mahassett, New York. The main house was designed by the New York architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich in 1927; the gardens were planned by cousin Louise. A contemporary description by architectural writer Augustus Owen Patterson provides a sense of the approach and the arrival at the main house:

The long driveway, thick with daffodils and rhododendrons in the spring, leads to the quiet color of the entrance facade and the walled forecourt. The cobble stones are blue-gray. The walls of the house depend on the expert laying of the stone and variety of the stone for their effect. The house is big and the treatment is big. The long panel of grass through the center of the forecourt, with its solid border of box, is in character with the planting around the house and with the point of view which Mr. and Mrs. Payson would have about a house built for the casual outdoor life they like to lead on Long Island. The plan of the house is on broad, simple, open lines. The attitude toward both exterior and interior is practical and unfinicking. The fine pattern of the iron work, projecting slightly beyond the entrance door, the open design with the fox-hunting trophies used for the window grilles, above, provide slight but definite ornament on the forecourt facade. At the left of the forecourt is a stone wall, perforated with an arched doorway, through which is seen a little lead figure centering a small, intimate garden on the allee side.¹³

Not mentioned in Patterson's article are the terraces off the living room and small sitting room to the north, the naturalistic pool with goldfish to the south, and the enclosed gardens to the west.

The Payson design was formal in character while at the same time incorporating naturalistic features like the long view across restful lawns to the lake. Louise undoubtedly knew cousin Charles very well and was able to develop a plan which complemented the architecture of the house and the family's social

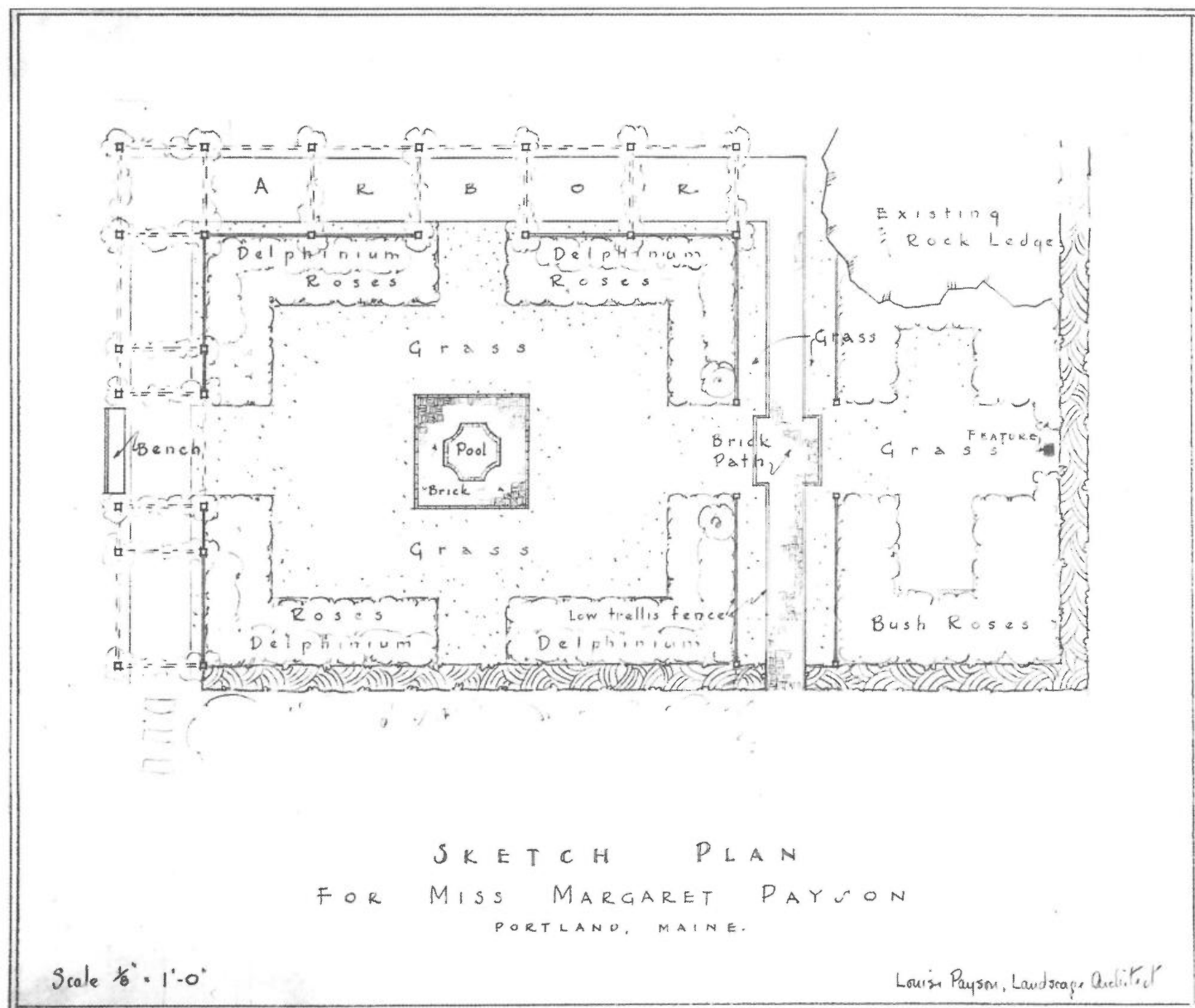


Figure 6. Enclosed garden for Miss Margaret Payson, Heron House, Falmouth Foreside, 1938 (Private Collection).

House and Garden selected a Louise Payson-designed landscape in their 1933 "Little House" competition. Similar to small house competitions today, the idea was to inspire readers of the possibilities for their own dream house. The imagined site was a flat corner lot, 60 by 150 feet, which was located in the suburbs. The architects, Frank S. Forster and R. A. Gallimore, known for their Norman farmhouse style residences, designed a small Georgian house with French influences. Miss Payson's design divided the lot into five areas and utilized all of the available space.

Similar to the small house competition idea was an article *House and Garden* published in 1937 entitled, "Three Houses for Two." Here the editor developed imaginary clients, all young couples with different personalities and interests, and asked three designers to create a suitable house for them. Miss Payson pre-

pared landscape plans for the distinctly different architectural styles: Regency, Dutch Colonial, and Modern, all on the same 75 by 100 foot lot. Mindful of the young couples' budgets, the houses were designed so that a wing could be added at a later date, and the landscaping was to be phased in over three years.

In 1934 Louise designed a hidden, heart-shaped garden for her cousin Philips Payson at Sandy Point Farm in Cumberland Foreside (Figure 5). The garden is nestled into the topography, and although it is near the main house and a guest cottage, it is easy to miss. The structure of the garden is derived entirely from plant materials. The shady portion is set against a backdrop of azaleas and taxas; the sunny portion of the border includes delphinium, thalictrum, peonies, and phlox. Also included on the drawing is a list of

flowers for the woods and shrubs for woods planting. The only architectural element in the garden is a curved seat.

Louise Payson continued her work at Heron House, and in 1938 she prepared a garden design for Miss Margaret Payson, her cousin (Figure 6). This was more architectural than any of her previous designs in Maine. The garden consisted of two rectangular sections defined by a rustic wisteria covered arbor along two sides with a brick walk. The simple planting plan within the enclosed space included delphiniums and roses in the large garden with a central brick pool. The adjoining space is defined with roses forming a hedge, and interestingly, a rock outcropping. This garden survives in a wonderful state of preservation. The surrounding shrubs and trees are now quite large and have given the space a very intimate, secret feeling.

Despite the Great Depression, Miss Payson continued to receive commissions throughout the Northeast. They varied tremendously in scale and type from large estates to roof-top gardens in Manhattan. Documentation on seventy projects survive in the form of drawings, photographs, and magazine articles spanning the fourteen years that she maintained her own practice. She upheld the Shipman tradition of the all female office, hiring mainly Lowthorpe and Cambridge School graduates.¹⁷ Louise closed her office in June, 1941 and spent that summer with Aunt Jeanette at Lane's End. Contributing to the war effort, she worked at Eastern Aircraft in New Hope, Pennsylvania from 1943 until May of 1944, when she sailed for Lisbon and volunteered as a relief worker. She returned seventeen months later to her father's house at 83 Carroll Street. In 1953 she purchased a farm in Windham which is still in the family.

Although Miss Payson had officially closed her office in 1941, she continued to design gardens during the 1940s and 1950s, mostly for friends in Cumberland and Falmouth Foreside. The drawings for these gardens are not as complete as the plans that were prepared in her years of active practice. However, the resulting designs are immediately recognizable as her work. These post-retirement projects are not included in the Payson office drawings but are in the hands of the present owners. Many plans are handed down to later owners and include penciled notes recording changes. Royce O'Donal, a landscape contractor, installed many of these gardens and has warm memories of working for Miss Payson. She was on site while the garden was being constructed, and he described her as "... always in control of the operation."¹⁸ Miss Payson did not charge for these designs, but instead asked that a client make a donation to one of the many

organizations in which she was active, including Colonial Dames, Victoria Society of Maine, Longfellow Garden Club, Maine Audubon Society, and the State Street Congregational Church.

Historically women have had a difficult time building a career in the design professions. Louise Payson was fortunate that she had the financial resources to pursue her professional training, access to clients, and as a child, her Aunt Jeanette and Annie Oakes Huntington as models whose interest in horticulture and design as well as their independent spirits surely inspired her. But it still required a strong-willed and determined woman to land commissions and build a career. As one woman put it early in the twentieth century:

Not for an instant will this daunt a woman to whom landscape design is a master passion. To her, hardships and responsibilities are but so many spurs. She exults in the demands upon every power of mind and body. In other words, she is an artist and in so far as her art is concerned, a willful fanatic.¹⁹

Through the 1960s and 1970s Louise Payson continued to work on her farm in Windham, relocating the drive, moving a gatehouse from Falmouth, and rebuilding a pergola. She remained active in various organizations and traveled extensively. She died unexpectedly on June 8, 1977 at the age of eighty-two while on a cruise in the Mediterranean.

Elizabeth Igleheart

FOOTNOTES

1. Jeannette Payson was the youngest of six children, the second daughter of Charles and Ann Robinson Payson. She was born in 1863 and died at the age of ninety-three in 1956.
2. Miss Huntington had great admiration for the manner in which Jeannette assumed her new responsibilities with the three Payson children. Little is known about Louise's early life, so the following letter from Miss Huntington to her friend Annie Rogers offers a glimpse of Louise as a child and Miss Huntington's affection for her:

Falmouth

Sunday, July 2, 1899

Back of the house, down a sloping bank, there are some old apple trees with a hammock and a seat looking across a sunny field of daisies to the water, and here I have stolen away for a word with you on this dreamy Sunday afternoon. I have just heard a voice from the bank call, "May I come down? If you'll let me come I won't let the bears get you", and then followed a brief visit from Louise. She is my favorite, first of all because she is a baby, and then because she is responsive, extremely affectionate, and always round me, - not so much because she seeks me out, but because Bob and Greta get aside of "Aunt Jeannette" before her short legs carry her, and she compensates herself with me.

This morning in church, for instance, she sat beside me and fell asleep in my lap; and my heart, which is all too hungry for a little girl, warms in a very motherly way towards her.

3. In 1903 Louise spent her summer with Aunt Jeannette and Annie Oakes Huntington at Chocorua, New Hampshire. Coincidentally, the same summer her half brother Prentiss was born. As an adult, she was a frequent visitor to Lane's End.
4. When Lane's End was first built, Jeannette used it mostly in the summer. As time went on and Annie suffered bouts of ill health, they spent more and more time there. In addition to the vegetable and flower gardens, Aunt Jeannette kept a small herd of Brown Swiss Cows. Annie kept bees, and together they shared a passion for Pekinese dogs. Always generous with her resources, Jeannette was concerned about the welfare of Waterford residents, and she often quietly provided for those in need. Jeannette was on the board of directors of Bridgton Academy and was also a major financial supporter of a new Waterford School.
5. A. F. Tripp, "Lowthorpe School For Women," *Landscape Architecture*, Volume III, 1912-13, pp. 14-18.
6. Turner, Nancy Byrd, editor, *Testament of Happiness, Letters of Annie Oakes Huntington*, Portland, 1947.
7. "Women and the Land. 'A Suitable Profession,'" *Landscape Architecture*, May, 1982, pp. 65-69.
8. "House and Gardens' Own Hall of Fame," *House and Garden*, June, 1933, p. 50.
9. I am grateful to John H. Dryflout, Superintendent, Saint Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire, for providing a copy of the Garden Notebook.
10. Louise Payson diary entry, 1922-23. The Alumni Office at Columbia University School of Architecture, Planning and Historic Preservation does not have a record of her attending.
11. Mr. & Mrs. Hugh Robinson generously shared this information.
12. Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller, *The Golden Age of American Gardens*, p. 210.
13. Article found in Louise Payson's personal possessions. The title of the magazine and date have been trimmed off, and as yet the source has not been located.
14. The author wishes to acknowledge the help of Mrs. Cameron Biewend, Mrs. Richard Earle, Mrs. Mary-Leigh Smart, and Mrs. David Linney for providing biographical information and locating the property. Mrs. Judith Oliver Paine, Miss Oliver's niece, was also helpful with photographs and information on the family.
15. *Golden Age of American Gardens*, p. 212.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
17. For more information on the professional network of women landscape architects, see Dorothy May Anderson's *Women, Design and the Cambridge School*, West Lafayette, Indiana, 1980.
18. Roger O'Donal interview.
19. Mary Bronson Hartt, "Women and the Art of Landscape Gardening," *Outlook*, March 28, 1908, p. 704.

KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY LOUISE PAYSON

Charles M. Payson, Falmouth Foreside, 1920, extant
 Edgar Robinson Payson, Portland, 1920, extant
 Mrs. Phillips Payson, Portland, 1921, destroyed
 John Oakley, Falmouth Foreside, 1930, extant
 Miss Judith B. Oliver, Ogunquit, 1930, extant
 Olcott Payson, Falmouth Foreside, 1930, altered
 Dr. and Mrs. Carl Robinson, Falmouth Foreside, 1932, altered
 Dr. George and Emma Payson Bradley, Falmouth Foreside, 1934, extant
 Phillips M. Payson, Cumberland Foreside, 1934-39, extant
 Miss Margaret Payson, Falmouth Foreside, 1938, extant
 Payson Farm, Windham, 1951-77, extant
 Mr. and Mrs. Barrett Vroman, Cumberland Foreside, 1955, extant
 Judge and Mrs. Edward Gignoux, Cumberland Foreside, 1956, extant
 Mr. and Mrs. Verrill, Cumberland Foreside, 1956, extant
 Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Lea, Cumberland Foreside, 1956, extant
 Westbrook College, Portland, 1970, altered
 Tate House, Portland, destroyed

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